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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

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INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000151

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/21/2029

TAGS: PREL SY

SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY (CLASSIFICATION) - PARADE OF CODELS
TO DAMASCUS: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T

REF: A. DAMASCUS 148
1B. DAMASCUS 147
1C. DAMASCUS 132
1D. DAMASCUS 94
1E. DAMASCUS 77

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b, d.

11. (S/NF) Since late January, Damascus has hosted four CODELs who in their sum total had more official face time with Syrian leaders than the Embassy has had in the last four years. All met with President Asad, FM Muallim, and Presidential Advisor Bouthaina Shabaan. All raised, in varying degrees, U.S. concerns regarding Syria's relations with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, Syrian interference in Lebanon, and Syria's tolerance of foreign jihadists entering Iraq through Syrian territory. All provided accounts of their meetings to the local, regional, and international press. According to a wide range of Syrian and diplomatic contacts and our own observations, those who received the most positive Syrian responses delivered frank messages in the context of the U.S. administration's desire to try new approaches to the region. The Syrian regime's back stiffened noticeably after hearing what it perceived to be a set of demands from one of the CODELs, who also listed the "demands" publicly prior to departing Syria. As Washington gears up for meetings between executive branch and Syrian officials, the experiences of these CODELs suggest that emphasizing a desire for a new era in bilateral relations will help to establish a much-needed positive tone after eight years of confrontation. If Washington is truly interested in "listening," as well as expressing its views, atmospherics matter significantly. Formulating our concerns in a positive spirit and acknowledging that Syria may well have concerns of its own (even if we don't agree with them) could help to produce tangible results in the future and provide an incentive for Syria to resist near-term internal and external pressures to increase destructive behavior in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. End Summary

12. (S/NF) While some memcons of CODELs Smith, Cardin, Berman, and Kerry are still being drafted and/or cleared by their staffs (see refs A, B, and C for CODEL Smith and Berman meetings), we have heard from a wide range of Syrian and diplomatic contacts their impressions of what was helpful and what wasn't. In addition, Emboffs observed firsthand each CODEL's meetings with President Asad and can add our own observations. In general terms, all of the CODELs effectively registered well-known U.S. concerns about unconstructive Syrian behavior in Lebanon, Iraq, with the Palestinians, and toward Israel. Each group's comments

elicited a familiar collection of bromides, obfuscation, and international relations jargon in response. And, to be sure, Asad carefully avoided making any concrete commitments and ably deflected calls for actions to demonstrate a newfound good will.

Engaging Asad: What Worked

¶3. (S/NF) The CodeIs who made a point of expressing support for a new approach to bilateral relations and recognized an example or two of positive Syrian behavior benefited from a more substantive and, dare we say it, cooperative dialogue. Senator Kerry's and Rep. Berman's meetings, during which they pulled no punches but couched their comments in the framework of "new things" to come, elicited hints of a potential Syrian willingness to find ways to cooperate on Iraq and Palestinian issues if there is a reciprocal desire on our side. The Embassy briefed all four groups and included the usual caveats about SARG duplicity. But our own sense is that a positive tone not only helped open up SARG officials, it also gave them enough to believe a new relationship might be possible, and as such, provided an incentive not just to act more positively, but to resist internal and external pressures that might be pushing the Syrian regime to regress.

With Kerry in particular, Asad late in the meeting abandoned his usual head of state posturing and engaged in an genuine exchange of views, though at some points Asad's candor was contrived for effect.

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¶4. (S/NF) Our Syrian and diplomatic contacts confirm positive SARG impressions about the groups who made a point of providing credit to the SARG for positive steps it has taken (e.g., establishing diplomatic relations with Lebanon). "This showed that the new administration really is different from the last," said one journalist who covered the visits. An independent analyst who claims access to Palace-level Syrian officials reported that "those delegations who pitched their concerns in the context of a problem-solving approach" made a positive impression on Asad and his closest advisors and created a desire for exploring potential areas of cooperation. "The Syrians like to feel relevant, and if you appeal to their innate desire to solve problems, they respond more naturally," this source suggested.

¶5. (S/NF) A third contact familiar with the CODEL's conversations suggested that drawing out Asad and other leaders and allowing them to expound upon their views provided many opportunities for CODEL members to insert their comments without appearing like they were making demands. "Obama has promised the Arab world he will listen. Well, if you listen, it helps you come across more credibly here and makes the points you raise more effective," he observed.

And What Doesn't

¶6. (S/NF) Most of our diplomatic colleagues agree that Syrians have developed a strong aversion to listening to a list of demands, particularly from the U.S. One CODEL's public comments on the need for the SARG to address human rights issues triggered an avalanche of editorials and other protests about "not dictating" to Damascus. (Asad himself told several of the CODELs that privately had raised the issue the U.S. had lost its credibility on human rights issues because of its support for Israel's Gaza incursion, the invasion of Iraq, and GTMO.) Even though the CODEL had not actually presented a list of demands, the critical tone of the public remarks seemed to cause a knee-jerk adverse reaction. There appears to be general consensus among our

contacts that the past administration's practice of presenting U.S. demands in expectation that Syria must fulfill them in order for there to be further dialogue only served to put the Syrian regime in a defensive posture. A French diplomat told us that the Syrians interpreted such an approach not only as a breach of manners, but also as a challenge to the legitimacy of the regime. "You risk not only cutting off the possibility of encouraging cooperative behavior, but also of pushing them to do something destructive," argued the Frenchman.

¶7. (S/NF) A German diplomat with access to several Syrian ministries advised that prioritizing issues yielded more positive results than what he termed the "laundry list approach." "Know what you want and put it in positive terms rather than negative," he suggested. The same diplomat suggested that the ability to humor token Syrian denials of any bad behavior also helped to avoid getting sidetracked from directing the conversation to achieving the desired objective. Indeed, characterizing Syrian behavior in any terms other than practical effect in achieving objectives appeared to turn off the Syrian interlocutors; Asad himself was very keen on emphasizing national interests and exploring areas where they converge.

Opening Gambits

¶8. (S/NF) Washington's decision to follow the barrage of CODELs visiting Damascus with initial meetings between Executive Branch and SARG officials offers an opportunity to register our concerns in a way that creates a lasting positive impression. We believe Syrians will be listening closely for signals that these first encounters are seen as a step to more substantive exchanges and are consistent with what they understand President Obama to have offered -- dialogue based on mutual respect and a willingness to listen. Just about every Syrian we meet tells us that it is important to cement the idea that this administration's

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approach will be materially different from the previous policies. Granted, form is not substance but to move the Syrians to substance, we are advised, we must first get past the hurdles of form, if only to find out if there is any point in persevering with the Syrians on issues of concern to us.

¶9. (S/NF) Recent experience with Asad and some of his senior advisors suggests that efforts to establish a positive tone will be reciprocated. While we recognize the importance of managing our messages because of other interests, we also believe that sending a positive signal now is tantamount to performing due diligence in exploring the potential for Syrian behavior more consistent with our goals for the region.

CONNELLY